

Michelle's Yellow Rose

DEADLY VIRUS DOESN'T END
AIRMAN PAIGE VILLERS' QUEST FOR HONOR

BY LOUIS A. ARANA-BARRADAS



There isn't a day that goes by that Michelle Villers doesn't think of — or talk about — her daughter, Airman Paige Villers.

She can't help it. Because when she talks about her Paige, whom she lovingly calls her Yellow Rose, a smile lights up Michelle's face. Then she gets that far-away look in her eyes.

That's when the words start pouring out, like the tears that will certainly follow.

Michelle is quick, almost anxious, to talk about Paige. Like she doesn't want anyone to forget her or what she accomplished during

her young life.

She recounts how Paige was born in Dallas and was "the perfect little girl" growing up. She said Paige was quiet, yet fiercely independent. Silly but mature. She had many jobs, but never missed a day of work. And that though cleaning her room wasn't a priority, standing up for what she thought was right was. Michelle knew her daughter loved helping others, but didn't know what color her hair would be the next week.

"My daughter made mistakes," Michelle said. "But she tried to make things right."

photo courtesy of Christina Henry



Though connected for months to a host of machines to keep her alive, Airman Paige Villers never gave up hope that one day she'd return to duty in the Air Force, her mother Michelle said.



Every year on Paige's birthday, brother Corey Villers gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Duty calls

But it's when Michelle talks about Paige's battle with the virus that cut short her Air Force career that emotion overwhelms her. "Paige was so patriotic," Michelle said. "She loved everything about being in the Air Force." That's because behind Paige's typical teenager's façade, a restless young woman yearned for more than what rural Norton, Ohio, could offer. She dreamed of leave her secure, small-town existence and starting her own life. The Air Force would let her do that, her mother said. "She was so headstrong, yet so determined in everything she did," Michelle said. "When she set her mind to doing something — that was it — she was doing that no matter what happened." A day after graduating from Norton High School, Paige told her mother and father, Don, she was joining the Air Force. She'd hinted at that before. Still, the Villers were surprise, and a bit apprehensive, about her joining the military during wartime. They asked her to think it over. But Paige had made up her mind the Air Force she knew so little about was the right path to the new life she sought. There was no dissuading her, Michelle said. So she went with her father to see Master Sgt. Sam Hensley, an Air Force recruiter. His office is in a strip mall at the end of Paige Street in Barberton, Ohio. Paige tried to learn all she could about the Air Force

before visiting him in September 2006. She asked many questions and the interview went well, he said. "She was determined to be in the Air Force from the moment she stepped into my office," said the sergeant, an 18-year air transportation veteran. "She made it very clear she wanted to serve her country, something you don't typically see in an 18- or 19-year-old today." Paige joined, and after a few months of waiting, packed her bag and headed for basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, in March 2007. She started to live her dream. "Paige was so excited. She joined the Air Force for honor, family and to finish her education," Michelle said, clutching a photograph of Paige tightly to her chest. The photo shows a bright-eyed Paige in her light blue Air Force uniform shirt, a dark blue jacket and flight cap. She looks no older than 17 — beaming with a smile of confidence. Michelle tears up each time she looks at the photo. "Paige looks so beautiful in her uniform," Michelle said. "I remember the day she had the picture taken. She called and said, 'Mom, I got to put on my blues today. I feel so proud, so proud to be in the Air Force — so proud of this country.'" Michelle recalls Paige's previous calls home. On her first call, she sounded rushed and scared. But by about her third call home, Michelle could notice a change in her daughter. "She sounded so sure of herself, so confident and mature — so happy," Michelle said. Paige talked about basic training, her new life, friends and the sense of family she was experiencing. About being able to do the push-ups she couldn't do before she left home. And about how she couldn't wait to finish her training and start her Air Force career. Christina Henry, Paige's aunt, had never known her niece to be so joyful and excited. "Paige wanted a life of honor, to do something that made a difference," Mrs. Henry said. But Paige only got to realize part of her dream. She never got the chance to leave Lackland to start what she hoped would be a 20-year Air Force career of helping others.

The virus

She started feeling sick during her fifth week of basic training, known as "Warrior Week." The weeklong exercise readies Airmen for deployment and living in field conditions. "Paige loved Warrior Week. She said it rained a lot and it was muddy," Michelle said. "But she said it was awesome sleeping in a tent and experiencing the camaraderie." But Paige didn't get better. She went to the clinic, where the diagnosis was she had allergies. Still, she didn't improve. She worried because it was close to her April 27, 2007 graduation, and she had to pass her physical fitness test to graduate. However, by this time, she was having trouble breathing. She didn't pass the run portion of the test, missing the cutoff by a few seconds, Michelle said. "Paige was so disappointed," she said. Then, during the first week in May, a high fever landed Paige in Lackland's Wilford Hall Medical Center, the Air Force's premier hospital. The diagnosis was mononucleosis. So she spent three days recuperating at the hospital before returning to the medical hold facility. Paige hated being in medical hold, and couldn't stand lying around doing nothing, Don Villers said. She was determined to get out of medical hold, pass her run test and graduate with her flight. Weak as she was, she joined other trainees to practice her run. "Her TI (technical instructor Staff Sgt. Carlos Coronado) constantly told her

she couldn't do any physical training," Don said. "So Paige went out and encouraged all the other kids running out there." But Paige didn't improve. The following week she got pneumonia and ended up at Wilford Hall's medical intensive care unit. Adult critical care and pulmonary medicine specialists told the Villers that Paige was critically ill. So Michelle and her sister flew to San Antonio the next day. When they arrived at her bedside, Paige was in a drug-induced coma and breathing through a ventilator. Paige's grandfather, Samuel Smith, also flew down, and stayed six weeks. "She was hooked up to all these tubes," Michelle said. "I was so scared." The virus making Paige sick was rare. It is a highly virulent strain of the adenovirus that causes the common cold — commonly called the "boot camp flu" at military training areas. But this highly contagious strain, adenovirus type 14, is relatively new to the United States. The strain is more common in Russia and Eastern Europe. This virus attacked Paige and hundreds of other recruits, hospital officials said. The virus killed 10 people in the United States, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials said. The virus infiltrated Wilford Hall. "This viral infection caused a mini outbreak. It affected Paige, many fellow trainees and, unfortunately, some of the initial medical staff caring for Paige before we diagnosed it as the adenovirus type 14 infection," Lt. Col. (Dr.) Mike Meyer said. The colonel is chief of pediatric critical care medicine for the 59th Medical Operations Group. Wilford Hall has the Air Force's only pediatric intensive care unit. "In an outbreak of this virus there is a huge range in the severity of illness, from a fever with chills to what happened to Paige," the colonel said. When pneumonia ravaged three-fourths of her lungs, doctors put Paige on a ventilator for several days. Medical teams used all their available technology to support Paige as the infection worsened. They even put her on a highly specialized ventilator called the high-frequency oscillatory ventilator. This machine, developed at Wilford Hall, can generate from 240 to 600 breaths a minute to care for sickest lungs, the colonel said. The noisy machine kept Paige alive for the moment. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to save her life. Then the ICU team asked Colonel Meyer — an expert in pediatric critical care medicine — to evaluate Paige and consider other options to save her life. Since she was a young adult, "Paige was a good candidate for ECMO treatment," he said. ECMO, or extra corporeal membrane oxygenation, treatments are normally used for infants and children with sever lung or heart disease when conventional medical treatments don't work and who are likely to die because of the disease. The ECMO machine is like to the heart-lung bypass machine used in operating rooms. The machine pumps blood out of the body, clears the carbon dioxide, oxygenates it and pumps it back into the body. And because it bypasses the heart and lungs it causes less stress and lets them rest and heal. Wilford Hall is one of the nation's first medical centers to develop and use ECMO technology. A joint team of pediatric intensive care unit and neonatal ICU experts are on the ECMO team. The colonel said the team has cared for teenagers in the past and the machine works on adult patients. He said Paige was a good candidate for ECMO. Colonel Meyer told the Villers the treatment was risky, but that, if successful, it could raise Paige's chances of survival from 10 to 40 percent. The Villers agreed to the treatment. "We would have tried anything to keep Paige alive," Michelle said. That's when Colonel Meyer

photo by Alan Boedeker



As an honor guard stands by, Brig. Gen. Darrell D. Jones, 37th Training Wing commander, presents Airman Paige Villers her Airman's Coin during a special graduation ceremony. Paige's father, Don, said he was proud to wheel his daughter to her basic training graduation. and his team of pediatric professionals took over Paige's care. But he needed a bigger team to care for Paige. So he informed the hospital commander, then Brig. Gen. (Dr.) David Young, and the hospital board of directors it would require a commitment from the entire hospital system to provide Paige the care she needed. Everyone agreed. The hospital also received total buy in from Brig. Gen. Darrell D. Jones, commander of the 37th Training Wing, the colonel said. The wing, the largest of its kind in the Air Force, has four primary training missions and graduates more than 70,000 students annually. Because Paige was so sick, the staff knew they had a fight ahead of them.

Ramping up

The hospital mobilized and then Paige became the first adult put on an ECMO circuit at Wilford Hall. Her family couldn't believe the effort put forth by the staff. "Everybody was at heightened alert," Mrs. Henry said. "We had different nurses and technicians that we gravitated to. They became like family, and they treated us like family." Because the virus is so contagious, the staff donned gowns, gloves and masks to protect themselves. And because of the risk of infection,





In memory of Airman Paige Villers, her mother, Michelle; aunt, Christina; and best friend, Rachel Payne, tattooed yellow roses on their feet. Michelle said the tattoos will serve to remind them of Paige forever.

the staff turned off the ICU's air conditioning and circulation system. But the machinery in the room generated heat and humidity and made it unbearably hot.

"It was 95 degrees in the room," Colonel Meyer said. "We had to recycle people in and out. So the team was much larger than we normally use. I think there were well over 125 people."

Paige was on the machine for two weeks, but the treatment worked. Then, after 36 days, she came out of the coma, something few doctors expected, given the gravity of her lung disease. She had lung damage and scarring and no one knew if she had suffered possible brain damage. And her kidneys had failed, too.

"But she was alive, and we were so grateful," Michelle said. "We were beyond ecstatic."

Paige was "all skin and bones," but otherwise "she was all Paige, and normal," she said.

Word quickly spread throughout Wilford Hall about Paige's struggle and recovery. People visited the ICU just to look at her. Even the cleaning staff asked about her.

"She amazed people," Michelle said. "Everybody knew about her and worried about her care."

Paige couldn't talk because doctors had performed a tracheotomy, opening a breathing passage in her throat, and insert tubes so she could breathe easier. Her muscles had atrophied and she didn't have the strength to hold a pen. For a few days, as the drugs wore off, she was in a daze and didn't want to know what had happened to her.

But Paige could mouth words.

One of her first things she asked was if she was still in the Air Force and if she would graduate from basic training. Michelle talked to General Jones, telling him Paige passed all her graduation requirements. She'd even passed the run portion of her fitness test before she got sick.

General Jones agreed.

"He said Paige would graduate before she left the base because she earned it," Michelle said.

When Michelle told Paige the news, her eyes got big.

"Then she asked me, 'Will I get my Airman's Coin?'"

That was very important to Paige, she said.

"I told her, 'Yes you are baby,'" Michelle said.

Paige dreamed of marching in her graduation parade and getting

her Airman's Coin, the ultimate symbol that she passed basic training and made it into the Air Force she wanted so much to be a part of. But she was so weak that Don was going to stand in for her.

But Paige wanted to be there. That's when the staff rallied around her again. They took it upon themselves to ready Paige to attend her graduation. First, they brought in a wheelchair and told her she had to sit in it for an hour a day so her muscles would get stronger.

"She would look at the clock to see how many minutes were left, and then she would push a little more because she was determined to be at her graduation," Michelle said.

The day before graduation, some nurses gave Paige a "pajama party." They gave her a sponge bath and washed her hair. But because of all the tubes attached to her, Paige couldn't wear her uniform. So, nurse Capt. Mike McCarthy bought her a physical fitness uniform. On graduation day, nurses fixed Paige's hair, applied makeup, painted her nails and encouraged her.

Wilford Hall used one of its critical care air transportation teams to escort Paige to her graduation. The mission of this highly specialized team is to transport the critically ill or wounded from the battlefield. The team had just returned from a tour in Iraq was excited to be part of the ceremony, the colonel said.

For sure, some of the people taking care of Paige went to the ceremony, too.

"It was impressive to see her lung disease, while severe, didn't stop her from what she wanted to do," Colonel Meyer said. The commitment by everyone to ensure Paige "got to meet her goals and dreams of what she wanted from the Air Force" transcended all his expectations.

"I was impressed with how we rallied around her and took care of one of our own," he said.

Paige didn't graduate with her class, which had left in April. But after the June 22, 2007, graduation ceremony for hundreds of other new Airmen, there was a special ceremony for Paige.

Don, who always wanted to, but didn't get the chance to serve in the military, wheeled his daughter onto the parade ground. She was a bit nervous, but excited at the same time, he said.

Then, in front of an honor guard of technical instructors, General Jones presented Paige with her coin and an Air Force Achievement Medal. She's the youngest Airman to receive the medal, base officials said.

"It was a tremendous honor to stand beside her at the ceremony," Don said. "But I wish I could have been watching her. You could see how happy she was when she got her coin."

For Paige, it was one of the greatest moments in her life, Michelle said. Her family, and the people who helped her recover, thought the worse was over. Even if she didn't get to stay in the Air Force, Paige would have the chance to return home and lead a somewhat normal life.

Relapse

But 32 days after she awoke from her coma, the virus attacked Paige again. Whether it was the adenovirus, or one of the other viruses going through her system, she developed an acute disseminated encephalomyelitis, Colonel Meyer said. A delayed reaction by Paige's immune system caused the relapse, he said. The immune system clears foreign things from the body.

"What we think happens is that the immune system has a delayed response to a part of the virus," the colonel said. The virus triggered a reaction in Paige's immune system that caused antibodies to start attacking the lining of her brain cells, he said.

As she stood in the ICU and watched, Michelle said, "Everybody was running around doing everything they could to save her."

"It was madness," she said.

But the virus had done its worse. And even the staff's superhuman effort to save Paige "couldn't stop her immune system's response," Colonel Meyer said.

When they learned Paige had a less than 10 percent chance of survival neither Michelle nor Don could force bring themselves to give the OK to take Paige off life support.

"If God was going to take her, then he would take her," Michelle said.

A doctor had to make the decision for them. Paige died at 12:39 p.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 7, 2007 — a full 45 minutes after she went of the ventilator.

"She fought to live to the very end," Colonel Meyer said.

The colonel said Paige's death decimated the entire Wilford Hall system, and that it was the hardest he's seen his team take a death.

"Paige's family thought they were out of the woods," the colonel said. "So when Paige died, it was like the entire weight of Wilford Hall came crashing down on them. I know a lot of our people felt like they were part of this family. And it all came crashing down on them, too."

News of Paige's death devastated Sergeant Hensley, who said it was the hardest day of his life as a recruiter. He went to the airport to pick up the Villers when they returned home. He felt it was his duty to be with the family he'd come to know so well.

"That's the way the Air Force does business — we take care of our own. And Paige was definitely one of us," the sergeant said.

The Villers



Michelle Villers hugs a photograph of her daughter, Paige, who is in her Air Force uniform. Paige called the day the photo was taken and told her mother how proud she was to wear her "blues" for the first time.

Corey, Michelle and Don Villers hold the American flag they received from an Air Force honor guard at the funeral for Airman Paige Villers, who succumbed to complications associated with the adenovirus 14. Mrs. Villers wanted to bury her daughter at the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery because it was close to their Norton, Ohio, home.



photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

buried Paige at Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery, a 20-minute drive from their home. Don took Michelle there before and she remembered how beautiful it was.

"I knew that was exactly where I wanted her because she deserved it," Michelle said. "It's peaceful and close to our home."

About 500 people attended Paige's burial, including family, friends and members of her high school band and church. An honor guard from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, gave Paige a full military burial with all the pomp and circumstance and seven Airmen fired a three-volley salute. And standing at attention during the ceremony was a full squad of Air Force recruiters.

Touched by Paige's tenacity and will to live, Sergeant Coronado volunteered to escort her remains back home, Michelle said. And the sergeant presented Michelle with an American flag at the funeral.

"I was so grateful the Air Force honored Paige the way it did," Michelle said.

Today, Paige rests side-by-side with hundreds of servicemembers who served, or died, in the nation's wars. A bouquet of silk yellow roses — put on Paige's grave by her best friend since seventh grade, Rachel Payne — reminds visitors of how happy, bright and full of life Paige was.

Paige's family hasn't fully coped with her death yet. For Michelle, who spent 86 days by her daughter's bedside, it has been especially tough. But she doesn't blame the Air Force or the hospital staff for Paige's death. She's thankful so many Airmen tried to save her life.

"They really cared about Paige,"

she said. "Nobody wanted her to make it more than me. But you could tell they wanted it as much as we did."

Many memories of Paige will always remain in the Villers' home and in the minds of her family and friends. One is of the yellow rose tattoo Paige got on her back before going to basic training. Michelle said it was beautiful.

"So when she died, I decided I wanted a yellow rose tattoo, because it's permanent — and as a tribute to Paige," Michelle said. Mrs. Henry got one, too, as did many of Paige's friends.

In the basement of the Villers home, Paige's 15-year-old brother, Corey, surfs the In-

A family reflects

As Airman Paige Villers' fought for her life, her new Air Force family rallied around the Villers family.

Paige's mother, Michelle, said the Airmen at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, went beyond any of her expectations as they tried to save her daughter's life.

"They treated us like family," Michelle said. "They took care of everything for us."

She said that care extended beyond the intensive care unit where the hospital staff worked around the clock for Paige. One sergeant lent the Villers a car for the entire time the family was at Lackland. And the Villers received countless offers to dinner. The nurses bought Paige perfume and high-top sneakers to strengthen her ankles. They constantly fussed over her.

Nurse Capt. Mike McCarthy took Michelle and her family to visit the Alamo in San Antonio. And on Michelle's birthday nurses got her a birthday cake, a catered meal and presents.

"They celebrated my birthday right there in the ICU," Michelle said.

Michelle's sister, Christina Henry, had never seen that extent of kindness.

"I mean, how many hospitals can you go to where the staff takes you into their home?" Mrs. Henry said. "They were patient and answered all our questions. They would sit with us, worry with us — even give us a hug when we needed it."

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas

ternet. He misses his sister and thinks of her every day. But he doesn't reveal his emotions well, until he starts talking about what Paige meant to him. He said they were close and good friends.

"She was somebody I could always go talk to," he said. "Sometimes, we talked about my girlfriends, or about problems with a friend at school."

When Paige decided to join the Air Force, Corey joked with her that she stole his idea. Corey had hoped to one day fly airplanes for the Air Force. But after Paige joined, he realized there were many things he could do in the Air Force besides flying jets.

"All I know, is I want to be a part of the Air Force," he said. "After I saw what happened to my sister — all the honor and how everybody takes care of each other — I really want to be a part of that Air Force family."